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Pacification: Early Doubts

Study Disputes Nixon's 1969 Optimism

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Speaking in Saigon in July 1969, President Nixon hailed the "steady progress in pacification" and praised the "improving performance of the Vietnamese armed forces." And soon afterward, back home, he "confidently" predicted that the Vietnam war would be over in "just three years."

But an administration survey of South Vietnam's current situation and future prospects, compiled about that time and now made public, voiced serious doubts about the embattled country's struggle that found little expression in the President's utterances during that period. The reasons for his rhetorical optimism at that time are unknown.

It was not wholly supported by the National Security Study Memorandum 1, compiled in early 1969 under the direction of Presidential Adviser Henry A. Kissinger.

This study, composed of contributions from eight U.S. civilian and military agencies and collated by Kissinger's National Security Council staff, essentially concluded that the South Vietnamese population could not be brought under the aegis of the Saigon regime for a long time to come.

The "optimistic" contributors to the survey were the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Pacific command in Honolulu, and the U.S. military and civilian missions in Saigon. The "pessimists" were the Central Intelligence Agency, the Secretary of Defense and two State Department offices, Intelligence and Research, and the East Asia bureau.

Summarizing their differences on the chances of "pacification", the U.S.-supported program to rally some four million South Vietnamese in Vietcong or contested areas to the Saigon regime, the survey says that the pessimists expected that goal to be

achieved in 8.3 years while the "pessimists" saw the objective attained in 13.4 years.

The two groups also offered contrasting assessments on the stability of President Nguyen Van Thieu's government, attitudes of South Vietnamese political elites, the Saigon army's capabilities, and Communist strategies.

Despite their divergent assessments, neither group excluded the kind of confidence contained in official U.S. statements in 1966 and 1967—or in President Nixon's comments in 1969.

A key area of conflict between the two groups, therefore, largely revolved around their estimates of the Saigon government's ability to survive and register gains.

As a summary of the survey put it, the "optimists" generally applauded the regime's performance and rated its probability of success "high" despite its occasional ineffectiveness. The "pessimists", on the other hand, regarded the Thieu regime as a failure in the countryside and, among other proposals, recommended that its representatives at the district and village levels seek an "accommodation" with the Vietcong.

James G. Lowenstein, a committee staff consultant who with Richard M. Moose was sent to Vietnam to report on the progress of pacification, the prospects for Vietnamization, the domestic political situation and the outlook for negotiations, said he and his colleague read NSSM 1 before leaving in December 1969.

Focusing on "pacification", the State Department questioned the validity of the so-called Hamlet Evaluation System, a statistical device contrived to estimate South Vietnamese loyalties.

The system was highly regarded at the time by Robert W. Komer, then deputy U.S. ambassador in Saigon and in charge of the pacification program.

Undoubtedly occurred," the

Department's report said, "it is difficult to measure it accurately, and attempts to quantify it have generally ended up by overstating it." Concurring in this criticism of attempts at quantification, the CIA report warned that the Saigon regime was becoming "enchanted" with "statistical progress," and was thus "widely dispersing its resources" in order to show its presence in many regions.

The Thieu government was able to do this, the CIA said, because it had encountered no real opposition from the Communists, who had retired to their sanctuaries in late 1968. But, the CIA added in a passage particularly relevant at present, "our ability to hold onto these gains has not really been subjected to military test."

The CIA therefore concluded that "progress in pacification is heavily dependent on the military environment." And carrying this thesis further, the State Department report asserted that "the key element in what progress has occurred has been the U.S. military presence." It said:

"Although few Americans have been directly committed to pacification, their presence has strengthened security and has both formed a protective shield behind which pacification program could operate and freed ARVN (South Vietnamese) forces to participate in pacification."

Citing a Special National Intelligence Estimate prepared by the CIA in January 1969, a Defense Department memorandum in the survey further pointed out that Americans rather than South Vietnamese had fundamentally animated the pacification campaign.

"It cannot be said that the various Saigon governments have shared the American enthusiasm or dedication to pacification," the Defense Department report, stated, adding that "the skills, funds and motivation have been overwhelmingly American." This practice, the report went on, tended to demoralize Vietnamese officers

manpower and "occasional high-level endorsements," have "been far from committed to the programs."

Moreover, the Defense Department went on, Saigon officials too often "have participated or cooperated simply to please their American counterparts, or to share in the spoils of the inevitable corruption."

Although optimistic about the Thieu regime's potentialities, the U.S. Embassy in Saigon nevertheless conceded that its weaknesses were the cause of its incapacity to show "more improvement."

Among these weaknesses, the Embassy report said, was the regime's "inability to communicate with the people" due to programs "considered pedestrian and lacking in imagination". The U.S. diplomatic mission also attributed the Saigon government's failure to arouse popular support to its inability to "root out corruption which, although traditional, is increasingly becoming a national issue."

As U.S. officials have since the Ngo Dinh Diem regime, the contributors to the survey almost all stressed that the Saigon government might be more effective if its "base" were "broadened" by the inclusion of diverse political elements.

But almost all the contributors reported that Thieu and his associates, like Diem, placed loyalty above competence. The narrowness of Thieu's political concepts would later be demonstrated in October 1971, when he maneuvered to run alone for re-election.

Turning to South Vietnam's military structure, the Defense Department report also deplored the fact that promotions in Saigon were determined by political loyalties, family ties and education rather than talent.

Pointing out that promotions were frequently made "through negotiation and compromise" by generals "trying to advance their protégés," the Defense Department report said that only two percent of officers owed their rank to "combat victories" and only seven percent were given field commissions. This practice, the report went on, tended to demoralize Vietnamese officers

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